

Alum supports people journeying through life's door

In 1969, as Mary Langenfeld's 17-year-old sister Judy was dying of leukemia, there was no one to guide her family through the grueling ordeal, no one to assist them during middle-of-the-night crises, no one to help them sort out their feelings of loss.

"I guess the reality is I wouldn't want anyone to go through that," says Langenfeld (MBA, '89), who was a nurse at the time of her sister's death. "I always go back to what it [would have been] like for my parents if they had just had one number to call."

Now, people nearing the end of life do have a number to call – Life's Doors Hospice, which Langenfeld founded in Boise 10 years ago. Its mission is to provide physical, psychological and spiritual support and care for people in the last phases of an incurable disease so that they may live as fully and comfortably as possible, usually in their own homes.

"The philosophy that we have at Life's Doors is that our goal is to help people live until they die," she says from the hospice office, where koi fish swimming in ponds, sculptured rocks, cascading water and natural lighting give the indoor and outdoor spaces an inviting and tranquil feel.

Langenfeld didn't immediately start a hospice program after Judy's death. It would be another decade before the hospice concept, imported from England, made inroads in American culture. Meanwhile, Langenfeld built a career with extensive executive-level

and patient-care roles in many areas of hospital operations in the Northwest and Midwest. In 1994, she felt the time was right to combine her medical and business skills to begin the hospice.

She has also founded and serves as

in human and organizational development from the Fielding Institute in Santa Barbara, Calif., in 1999. Yet she still makes good use of her earliest degree – in nursing.

"I carry a caseload and I rotate [being on] call with all the rest of the nurses," she says. "That's the best part of the job."

"It's very difficult to describe what it feels like when you go into someone's home at three o'clock in the morning and their fear level is high. Just seeing, feeling the warmth with which they welcome you, the respect that they have for what you can do to help them, and the gratitude that they have that you're willing to get out of bed in the middle of the night ... I just can't describe the feeling."

Hospice care goes beyond meeting a patient's physical needs. "Hospice is a very holistic concept," Langenfeld says. Its focus on life and death as a journey allows people to – if they choose to do so – heal relationships and spiritual wounds and die in peace.

"We just had a gentleman who died not very long ago who was able to see a daughter he had not seen in more than 26 years," she says.

Sharing these journeys with people has changed Langenfeld in ways she never imagined when she started the hospice.

"I think the greatest lesson I've learned is what the patients have taught me – to be open to those lessons and do what I can to shape my life in such a way that it is one of gratitude and one of giving."

— Patricia Pyke



Langenfeld says the staff at Life's Doors contributed healing concepts to the building design, including a peaceful garden.

CEO of Life's Doors Home Care Solutions, which provides in-home personal care, and Life's DoorWays, a nonprofit organization that provides grief education.

This head of a company that employs more than 70 people is a self-avowed lifelong learner, having earned several medical certifications and five academic degrees including her MBA from Boise State and a Ph.D.